

NCA
VOC FOR IOP/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-5597
FRED BROWN/DACCA

MARCH 9, 1978

BIHARI REPATRIATION

ANNCR:

THE RECENT DECISION BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS IN GENEVA, SUSPENDING THE RED CROSS ROLE IN THE REPATRIATION OF BIHARI REFUGEES IN BANGLADESH, HAS FOCUSED ATTENTION ONCE AGAIN ON THE PLIGHT OF THE THOUSANDS OF BIHARIS STILL LIVING IN REFUGEE CAMPS ALMOST SEVEN YEARS AFTER THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE. CORRESPONDENT FRED BROWN HAS BEEN VISITING DACCA AND HAS A SPECIAL REPORT:

VOICE:

(OPT) THE RED CROSS HAD BEEN GRADUALLY REDUCING ITS INVOLVEMENT IN THE BIHARI REPATRIATION PROGRAM EVER SINCE THE FIRST PHASE OF THE PROGRAM ENDED IN JULY, 1974. BY THAT TIME, ONLY A FEW MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED THOUSAND OF THE APPROXIMATELY FOUR HUNDRED THOUSAND BIHARIS WHO ELECTED TO GO TO PAKISTAN AFTER THE WAR, HAD BEEN REPATRIATED. SINCE THEN, ONLY A FEW THOUSAND BIHARIS ABLE TO PAY THEIR OWN WAY HAVE MADE THEIR WAY TO PAKISTAN. LAST WEEK'S ANNOUNCEMENT IN GENEVA APPARENTLY REFLECTED THE RED CROSS IMPATIENCE WITH THE FAILURE OF BANGLADESH AND PAKISTAN TO RESOLVE THE ISSUE OF THE REMAINING BIHARIS IN BANGLADESH. (END OPT)

THE BIHARI REPATRIATION PROGRAM WAS BEGUN AS PART OF A THREE-WAY EXCHANGE WORKED OUT BETWEEN INDIA, PAKISTAN AND BANGLADESH TO RESOLVE THE HUMANITARIAN PROBLEMS CREATED BY THE 1971 WAR. UNDER THIS PROGRAM, THOUSANDS OF PAKISTANI PRISONERS OF WAR WERE SENT HOME FROM INDIA. BENGALIS STRANDED BY THE WAR IN PAKISTAN WERE MOVED TO BANGLADESH, AND AN UNSPECIFIED NUMBER OF BIHARIS IN BANGLADESH WERE TO BE MOVED TO PAKISTAN.

THE BIHARIS, WHO HAD COME TO WHAT WAS THEN EAST PAKISTAN FROM INDIA AFTER PARTITION IN 1947 HAD SIDED WITH WEST PAKISTAN IN THE WAR, AND THEY FLED TO REFUGEE CAMPS WHEN THE WAR ENDED TO ESCAPE REPRISAL. ALTHOUGH AT FIRST IT WAS UNDERSTOOD THAT ALL BIHARIS WHO WANTED TO WOULD BE REPATRIATED, PAKISTANI AUTHORITIES -- WORRIED ABOUT THE POSSIBLE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPACT OF SUCH A LARGE INFLUX -- QUICKLY MADE IT PLAIN THIS WAS NOT TO BE THE CASE.

FOUR CATEGORIES OF ADMISSION WERE ESTABLISHED: PERSONS WHO HAD RESIDED IN WEST PAKISTAN; CENTRAL GOVERNMENT EMPLOYEES AND THEIR FAMILIES; MEMBERS OF DIVIDED FAMILIES; AND HARDSHIP CASES -- MAINLY THOSE WHO HAD ACTUALLY FOUGHT AGAINST BANGLADESH INDEPENDENCE. SUBSEQUENTLY, THE TERM "DIVIDED FAMILIES" WAS INTERPRETED NARROWLY BY PAKISTANI OFFICIALS TO MEAN ONLY CASES WHERE HUSBANDS AND WIVES WERE SEPARATED -- NOT PARENTS AND CHILDREN OR BROTHERS AND SISTERS OR OTHER BLOOD RELATIVES. AND SO FAR, VERY FEW OF THE SO-CALLED HARDSHIP CASES HAVE BEEN ACCEPTED.

OFFICIALS OF THE CENTRAL REPATRIATION COMMITTEE, AN ALL-BIHARI ORGANIZATION PRESSING THE CAUSE OF REPATRIATION, TOLD THIS CORRESPONDENT THAT INSTEAD OF REUNITING FAMILIES, THE SYSTEM OF SELECTION CAUSED FURTHER DIVISIONS. OTHERS HAVE CHARGED THAT PAKISTAN TOOK ONLY THE BETTER EDUCATED AND HEALTHIER BIHARIS, OFTEN LEAVING BEHIND THOSE LEAST ABLE TO COPE.

(OPT) THIS DESCRIBED COOLNESS OF THE PAKISTANI ATTITUDE TOWARD THE BIHARIS HAS NOT DAMPENED THEIR DETERMINATION TO GO TO PAKISTAN. RED CROSS OFFICIALS CLAIM THAT FAR FROM BEING A BURDEN, THE BIHARI WORKERS COULD BRING TECHNICAL SKILLS THAT WOULD HELP MAKE UP FOR THE THOUSANDS OF SKILLED WORKERS LEAVING

PAKISTAN FOR THE OIL-RICH GULF COUNTRIES. (END OPT) BY ANY RATE, RECENTLY THERE HAS BEEN AN INDICATION THAT THE GOVERNMENT OF PAKISTAN IS EASING ITS POSITION ON BIHARI REPATRIATION. DURING HIS RECENT VISIT TO PAKISTAN, BANGLADESH PRESIDENT ZIUR RAHMAN ANNOUNCED THAT PAKISTAN HAD AGREED TO TAKE ANOTHER TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND BIHARIS. WHILE BIHARI LEADERS IN BANGLADESH SAY THIS IS FAR FROM ADEQUATE, THEY ARE NEVERTHELESS ENCOURAGED. THEY ATTRIBUTE THE RELAXATION IN PAKISTAN'S ATTITUDE TO THE DEPARTURE FROM THE SCENE OF FORMER PRIME MINISTER ZULFIQUR ALI BHUTTO, WHO THEY CLAIM DID ALL IN HIS POWER TO HALT THE REPATRIATION PROGRAM.

RECENTLY, AN OFFICIAL OF THE U.N. HIGH COMMISSION FOR REFUGEES VISITED BANGLADESH TO DISCUSS THE PAKISTANI OFFER. SO FAR, THERE IS NO INDICATION OF WHERE THE FUNDS FOR TRANSPORTING THE TWENTY-FIVE THOUSAND PEOPLE WILL COME FROM OR WHAT THE CRITERIA FOR SELECTION WILL BE. BUT THE BIHARIS SAY THEY HAVE BEEN TOLD THAT OTHER MOSLEM COUNTRIES MAY BE WILLING TO FOOT THE BILL.

THEY ALSO SAY THAT IF PAKISTAN WILL RECOGNIZE THEM AS CITIZENS AND ISSUE THEM PASSPORTS, THEY WILL BE ABLE TO MAKE IT THERE GRADUALLY BY THEIR OWN EFFORTS IN DUE TIME, AT NO COST TO ANYBODY ELSE. IF, ON THE OTHER HAND, NOTHING IS DONE, THEY SAY THEIR FRUSTRATIONS WILL CONTINUE TO BUILD UNTIL THERE IS VIOLENCE. (OPT) SOME BIHARIS HAVE STARTED TALKING ABOUT A MASS MARCH FROM BANGLADESH TO PAKISTAN -- A PROSPECT THAT BIHARI LEADERS SAY WOULD INVOLVE IMMENSE HARDSHIPS AND WOULD PROBABLY MEET RESISTANCE FROM ALL THREE COUNTRIES -- BANGLADESH, INDIA AND PAKISTAN. (END OPT)

WJL/RCS